R/V REGINA MARIS

— Ship to Shore News —

SEARCHLIGHT Vol. 8 No. 1 3 January 1983 Hurricane Hole

At 1500 on December 28, R/V REGINA MARIS sailed off the dock at San Juan, carrying 21 students, a crew of 9, and 4 scientists. We motorsailed from the harbor entrance to the Virgin Islands, and anchored at Caneel Bay at 1600 the next day. On the 30th, we continued on to Hurricane Hole. We anchored there, near the entrance to Princess Cove, and our students were soon in the water, continuing our ecological studies of this diverse marine area.

Some students are initiating studies of coral zonation and movement of sea urchins. Others are learning about sponges, hermit crabs, and other fauna that live on the abundant coral and sea grass. They are finding the reality of marine research to be less glamorous but in many ways more exciting and satisfying than their expectations. The long, wet hours of collection and observation are beginning to form a coherent picture of this ecosystem.

This afternoon we will hear a presentation by personnel of the St. John National Marine Park. Then, early in the morning of January 4th, we will sail for St. Thomas, where students and staff will have a day of duty-free shopping before leaving for San Juan, Puerto Rico, where Expedition #43 will end on January 5th.

Respectfully submitted,

Evan Logan
Relief Master,
ORV REGINA MARIS

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SEARCHLIGHT Vol. 8 No. 2 17 January 1983 Silver Bank

At 1600 sharp on 8 January, 1983, we sailed off the dock in San Juan, Puerto Rico and began Expedition #44, to study humpback whales in their tropical breeding grounds near the Dominican Republic. The breeze was fresh from the southeast, providing us with a fair wind to clear harbor and coast westerly along the north shore of Puerto Rico to Punta Borinquen, where we expected to find whales at first light on the 9th of January. We arrived on schedule, but did not see our first whale until 1041. When it would not allow us to approach, we continued on to Isla Desacheo, to arrive there by evening. There we encountered about thirty pilot whales making passage to the northeast from whence we had come. We clewed up and turned to motor with them for about one half hour, taking photographs and observing their curious behavior. When we left them we set sail again to round the south end of Isla Desacheo in daylight before heading off for Navidad Bank, one hundred and twenty miles off the northeast cape of the Dominican Republic.

The morning of the 10th of January found us sailing towards Navidad with the 20 knot easterly breeze to push us along. Two spotted dolphins milled about for a while in the morning and when they left a young minke whale swam alongside momentarily. Later, toward noon, as we approached Navidad Bank, a humpback whale breached in the sunstreak as if to announce our arrival. We hove to at dusk to listen on the hydrophone and await the next morning, which we thought would bring us more whales. Unfortunately, the breeze which was fine for sailing made the sea lumpy and uncomfortable all night. The tossing of the ship also drowned out the few whale songs we might have heard.

By the morning of the 11th of January, the wind was steady 20-25 knots and the seas were too sloppy to see whales, unless they leaped out of the water. One very young calf did so, about one quarter mile off our starboard bow, but after it landed back in the water we could not find either it or its mother. The sea was so rough on Navidad that we set sail before lunch for Silver Bank, to arrive the following morning.

At 1000 on 12 January we sailed up on the west edge of Silver Bank and conducted a whale census as we proceeded to Station 2 in the lee of the main reef. We saw 24 whales during the census, for a density of .66 whales per nautical mile square--about average for this early in the season. The most remarkable sighting of the day was not a whale, but a six thousand ton freighter which had run aground on the reef 2½ miles east of Station 2! This was certainly a new feature since we left Silver Bank last March, and it provided us with a landmark we've sorely needed since we began this work in 1977. After obtaining a few fluke photographs in the afternoon, we nuzzled up towards the reef to anchor for the night and listen for whale songs with the hydrophone. For an hour in the calm of the evening, we recorded a great solo singing whale.

Obviously, the shipwreck was on everyone's mind during the night. At first light on the 13th a salvage crew in the Avon went over to inspect it and see what might be of use to us. As if on cue, the skies clouded over for 2½ days, precluding our raising anchor to look for whales, so there was nothing to do but bring back odds and ends from the wreck and sort through them as if they were treasures. There is something very eerie and fascinating about plundering shipwrecks, whether or not one finds anything of value. I suppose that some of this derives from the simple opportunity to find something that has great worth, and some of it from exploring the unknown. Though few appreciate it yet, it is the same with the science we pursue on this foresaken place.

Finally on the 16th of January the skies cleared and the breeze dropped to 3 knots, affording us the opportunity to raise anchor and follow the whales around all day, photographing and admiring them. The weather was equally good today, the 17th of January. In these two days we have obtained more than 10 good fluke photographs and have seen several familiar whales. This is the real pleasure of Silver Bank. Thousands of whales come here each winter to calve and play and we know many of them quite well. They come from Massachusetts, Newfoundland, Labrador, the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Greenland, and Iceland, and they mingle and cavort with one another for a month or more before making their two to three thousand mile journey back from whence they came. Each photograph we take and each matching photograph we find provide one more little bit of the information needed to assemble a biological puzzle that has never before been solved. Ten years ago it was not considered possible to solve a jigsaw puzzle of such magnitude. Seven years ago we set about doing it.

Respectfully submitted,

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